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ABSTRACT

Based on the belief that positive physical teacher/learner interaction in the form of touch or closeness is a natural expression of humanness and an appropriate demonstration of a teacher's acceptance, caring, and concern for the wellness of students, this essay seeks to provide a clear theoretical framework from which to view the importance of physical contact to a child's development. Discussion centers around the value of positive physical interactions to communication, to the child's emotional and social maturation, and to the establishment of a healthy teacher/learner relationship. It is hoped that teachers, armed with a solid theoretical rationale, will be convinced of the appropriateness of touch and closeness with children, and will be able to confidently defend these as valid teacher actions. (Author/RH)

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On the Importance of Touching

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Abstract

Based on the belief that positive physical teacher-learner interaction in the form of touch or closeness is a natural expression of our humanness and an appropriate demonstration of a teacher's acceptance, caring, and concern for the wellness of students, this essay seeks to provide a clear theoretical framework from which to view the importance of physical contact to a child's development. Discussion centers around the value of positive physical interactions to communication, to the child's emotional and social maturation, and to the establishment of a healthy teacher-learner relationship. It is hoped that teachers, armed with a solid theoretical rationale, will be convinced of the appropriateness of touch and closeness with children, and will be able to confidently defend these as valid teacher actions.

In a recent article, Mazur and Pekor (1985) posed the question, "Can teachers touch children anymore?" The viewpoint these authors expressed focused on the value of physical contact to child development, and was set against the current concerns about sexual abuse of young children. Mazur and Pekor argued that "thoughtful, developmentally appropriate physical contact between teachers and children plays an important role in any early childhood program," and spoke of the need to "continue to develop a clear theoretical understanding of the importance of physical contact in facilitating children's development" (pp. 11-12).

Recently publicized cases of child sexual abuse in several day care programs represents not the tip of the iceberg of widespread problems, but rather a small percentage of the number of such programs in existance. But the negative publicity casts suspicion upon almost everyone who works around young children. Few teachers would question the appropriateness of incorporating tactile stimulation and experience into their teaching in order to promote the cognitive and academic development of their students. A review of the literature related to teacher education, however, reveals a scarcity of attention to tactile stimulation in reference to the affective development of students, despite the fact that stimulation via touch has long been recognized as being important to an individual's physical and emotional well-being and to his or her capacity for interpersonal relationships (e.g., Colton, 1983; Forer, 1972; Frank, 1957; Harlow, 1958; Keating, 1983; Montagu, 1978). Books on teaching strategies and classroom management are largely devoid of reference to the use of physical contact by teachers and the benefits that may ensue from such contact, except to promote the use of touch to control behavior or to help a student master a motor activity. As a subject of empirical study,

teachers' use of physical interactions with children has seldom been a concern. An exception to this is an investigation by Clements and Tracy (1977) in which the potential value of tactile reinforcement was demonstrated, especially when used in conjunction with verbal feedback to the student. However, Clements and Tracy suggested that physical contact is seldom applied in a systematic or goal-directed manner by teachers, even though their daily transactions with students frequently include some kind of touching.

The attitude of teachers toward physical contact with students, and the extent to which they consciously employ various forms of touch was studied by Anderson (1985). Although based on data gathered from a limited geographical area, it was reported that a large majority of the teachers surveyed agreed that positive (i.e., non-punitive) physical contact with students was appropriate, and that such interactions do have a positive effect on their students' self-concept, self-control, classroom behavior, and rapport with the teacher. Nevertheless, the teachers rated themselves quite low in the frequency with which they engage in positive physical contact, lending support to Clements and Tracy (1977) in their belief that touch is rarely used effectively or systematically.

What exactly is the place of touch in an educational program? How does physical contact contribute to a child's development? If physical contact plays such an essential role in a child's development, what will become of children in today's day care and educational programs who are denied this crucial element out of teachers' fear that the meaning of their contacts with children might be misconstrued? If physical contact is as essential as Mazur and Pekor (1985) maintain, teachers and child care workers need to be convinced of the value and appropriateness of physical contact with children, and must

be able to confidently defend such actions in the face of parental or societal inquiry.

The basic premise of this essay is that positive physical interaction in the form of touch or closeness is not only a natural expression of our humanness, but is a fitting demonstration of the teacher's attitude of acceptance, caring, and concern for the wellness of the individual. The nature of such contacts will necessarily vary according to the age and developmental level of the students, but might include holding, touching, and shaking the hand; stroking the forearm; hugging or placing the arm around the shoulder; seating the child on the teacher's lap; or patting or rubbing the back. In support of this premise, the following discussion seeks to pull together the ideas of various psychologists and educators regarding touch and physical contact, and to address the need identified by Mazur and Pekor (1985) for a clear theoretical understanding of the importance of physical contact to child development. To that end, the discussion centers around the importance of positive physical interactions to communication, to the emotional and social maturation of the child, and to the development of a healthy teacher-learner relationship.

Touching and Communication

Drawing from his experience using various forms of touch in therapy, psychologist Sidney Jourard (1968) said, "I believe we are a nation of people who are starved for physical contact" (p. 65). Similarly, Simon (1976) emphasized the need for human contact ("skin hunger") as the most basic form of communication. To borrow from Colton (1983), "words <u>say</u> the message, but touching <u>acts out</u> the message" (p. 101). Touch, the most social of all human senses (Colton, 1983), provides "recognition strokes" (James & Jongeward, 1978)

and "validation" (Simon & O'Rourke, 1977) that all children require. Tactile communication (Frank, 1957) serves to reduce the psychological distance between people in a way that verbal communication cannot, by non-verbally acknowledging to the student "you are here, you are important, you are special, you matter" -- a message that may be particularly effective in countering feelings of alienation or expectations of failure many children feel (e.g., those with learning and/or behavioral difficulties). Says Montagu (1978),

> It is not words so much as acts communicating affection and involvement that children, and, indeed, adults require. Tactile sensations become tactile perceptions according to the meanings with which they have been invested by experience. Inadequate tactile experiences will result in a lack of such associations and a consequent inability to relate to others in many fundamental human ways. When affection and involvement are conveyed through touch, it is those meanings, as well as the security giving satisfactions, with which touch will become associated. Hence, the human significance of touching. (p. 319)

Emotional and Social Maturation

Following from his extensive review of the medical, psychological, and sociological research related to tactile stimulation and experience, Montagu (1978) concluded that "adequate tactile satisfaction during infancy and childhood is of fundamental importance for the subsequent healthy behavioral development of the individual" (p. 318). The relationship between tactile stimulation and one's emotional status is captured in the statement, attributed to comedian Bob Hope, "So and so wasn't cuddled, so he curdled" (Howard, 1970, p. 149).

Physical contacts are said to occur with "substantial frequency" in child

treatment provided by psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers (Cowan, Weissberg, & Lotyczewski, 1983). Such contacts are believed to be of therapeutic value (Forer, 1972) by providing a kind of "psychological nourishment" leading to a broadened sense of self (cf. Pattison, 1973), to enhanced trust, and to a greater degree of freedom in participating in the world. In other words, there is a direct relationship between the extent of physical closeness a child experiences and self-esteem: The higher the student's self-esteem, the more comfortable the student is in communicating through touch (Silverman, Pressman, & Bartel, 1973). Self-perceptions are formed as a result of transactions between the individual and his environment (Beane & Lipke, 1984). Data received from the child's direct actions upon the animate and inanimate aspects of the environment, and in the form of verbal and non-verbal feedback from transactions with significant others (parents, teachers, peers), is used to construct a concept of self in the same way that the child develops concepts of objects or number. A child's feelings about himself are largely dependent upon the affect he receives from those significant others, which is communicated through their words and actions. A teacher's willingness to approach, touch, or be physically close to the child communicates something to the child about his personal worth. A sense of worth is the most essential psychological need of every human being, and is derived from feelings of <u>security</u> (love, acceptance, belongingness) and <u>significance</u> (purpose, meaning, personal adequacy). Human contact through touch is recognized as crucial to feelings of security (Fallen & McGovern, 1978) and as a way of validating, or acknowledging the existence and value of a person (Simon & O'Rourke, 1977). Touching can break down feelings of discouragement, aloneness, or isolation which lead to a sense of worthlessness.

Tender, respectful human contact creates an atmosphere of acceptance and caring in which the child can be more free and relaxed. His feelings of confident acceptance -- of trust and belongingness -- allow him the freedom to explore his environment and to open himself to new experiences (academic and social) without undue anxiety about the possibility of failure. Just as an attachment forms between a child and his primary caregiver, thus enabling the child to move out and explore his expanding world, secure in the knowledge that the caregiver remains as a safe-base to which he can return for "refueling" of affect, so physical closeness and contact provides a sense of security for humans of any age. As Colton (1983) puts it, "Knowing that we are valued sends us into the world with some magical inner strength to defeat life's slings and arrows" (p. 49).

An individual's development as a healthy human being can be measured by the degree to which he or she feels free to embrace another or to be embraced -- "to get, in a very real sense, into touch with others" (Montagu, 1978, p. 228). Much of that freedom and joy in human contact comes from the child's experiences with his or her parents and teachers. Children need to receive, as well as to give, soft, gentle, caressing touches in order to know both that they are loved and that they are capable of loving others (Simon & O'Rourke, 1977).

Thus, physical contact is viewed as an essential part of the socialization process (Forer, 1972). Montagu (1978) introduced the concept of the "tactually failed child" to refer to someone who had experienced inadequate tactile, or touch stimulation and who is, therefore, physically, psychologically, and behaviorally awkward in relationships with other persons. Colton (1983) was more direct, and called such individuals "touch-starved." She referred to child development authority Selma Fraiberg, who described such persons as

"bondless, hollow men and women who contribute largely to the criminal population" (p. 42). To support this statement, Colton quoted Dr. Irwin Hyman, Director of the National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment and Alternatives in the Schools, as saying, "Americans are more willing in many cases to touch punitively than to touch lovingly. My research shows that extremely punitive (verbal and) physical contact results in lower achievement and creates greater discipline problems" (Colton, 1983, p. 161).

As children grow older, there is a move from proximal contact involving touch to distal contact through verbalization, both by parents (Montagu, 1978) and by teachers (Anderson, 1985), so that by adolescence physical contact is either extremely limited or completely terminated. And yet the need for human contact continues throughout life. In fact, McAnarney (1984) posited that the basic need of adolescents may be for close physical connectedness with another human being -- i.e., to by touched or cuddled -- and suggested that the increase of teenage pregnancies and sexual activity may be an attempt to meet that basic need, since parents and teachers are withholding or at least decreasing their physical attention to the adolescent.

In their work with students, teachers acknowledge the role played by positive reinforcement in shaping a student's academic and social behavior, and can easily identify appropriate token, verbal, and social reinforcers. It is unfortunate, however, that many teachers fail to recognize, or simply choose to ignore, the powerful reinforcement value of positive physical contact, and its potential for strengthening self-concept.

Teacher-Learner Relationship

Physical closeness is not only a way of communicating acceptance and

caring, but a way of communicating ourselves, of bridging the gap between individuals that has produced feelings of estrangement. Physical closeness says to the child, particularly the one who has been experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties, "we are in this together." In this way, physical closeness and touching are vital for creating relationships (Buscaglia, 1984).

A primary goal of teachers is to establish a positive learning atmosphere through the manipulation of the physical and social environment of the classroom so as to make it more responsive to the needs of the student and enable the student to function more comfortably and effectively (cf. Knoblock, 1983). The attitude of the teacher and the relationship which exists between the teacher and the child (a relationship which, of necessity, requires continuous teacher-learner interaction) are major contributers to the social environment. Since tactile experience is essential to the cognitive development of the child and to his growing sense of self, physical contact between teacher and student should be a natural ingredient of that interactive relationship. Forer (1972) commented that appropriate physical contact within a client-therapist relationship tells the client more about the therapist's emotional relationship with him than purely verbal comment, thus reassuring and encouraging the client. Nothing less is true of the teacher-learner relationship, the quality and strength of which is of major consequence in facilitating the child's growth (Rogers, 1969).

Haim Ginott (1972) spoke of the need to communicate "sane messages" to students. His point was that the language of the teacher influences the child's self-esteem, and he therefore cautioned teachers to attend to the message given to their students so as to be certain that they do not give the student cause to doubt his own perceptions and feelings about his self-worth

(e.g., "Any dummy can do this"; "It's easy"; "Can't you do anything right?"; "That's stupid!"). Sane messages will seek to support rather than to belittle. The expression of our caring in the teaching relationship demands that we communicate sanely with our students.

The student's understanding of our meaning depends on his interpretation of our gestures, facial expression, body langauge, intonation, and physical proximity to an even greater extent than it depends on the semantic and syntactic features of the words spoken. The teacher's willingness to maintain physical closeness and to touch the student, therefore, not only communicates acceptance and caring, but is a reflection of the depth and sincerity of the teacher's concern for the student, and discloses the quality of the teacher-learner relationship.

Smith (1982) spoke of the desire of teachers to establish the kind of relationship with students that will motivate students to learn and will nurture them in their personal growth. Notice the words used by Smith to characterize that relationship:

> Relationship means making contact (italics added) with children, feeling (italics added) their joy, and sharing their pain. Relationship means reaching out (italics added) to children and showing them we want to share something of ourselves with them....If we believe in this relationship, we are likely to detest conditions which prevent us from making contact (italics added) with children. Large classes bother us because children can remain anonymous in a crowd. Rigid schedules and uniform classroom behavior disturb us because children may fail to discover their own unique talents under these circulstances. We want to know and be known by our children and to be able to respond to their needs as we

encourage their abilities. We want to celebrate with them their enthusiasm for learning. (p. 3)

Perhaps the abundance of terms used in everyday speech that refer to touch and closeness (e.g., making contact, feeling, reaching out) are an unconscious reminder to the significance of and need for human relatedness.

Smith went on to suggest ways to strengthen the impact of the teacher-learner relationship. Among these methods is making physical contact with children through such actions as holding, hugging, rocking, or gently touching students while speaking to them. All of these actions not only build the relationship, but have a positive and soothing effect on the student's physical well-being.

The teacher-learner relationship is charged with psychological meaning (Jersild, 1952) and is instrumental in the development of the learner's self-concept, whether positive or negative, and the degree to which the learner's potential is realized. The poorest teaching is that which is clinical and impersonal. Teaching is more than just communicating content: "Teaching is relationship. Real teaching, real learning, exist within that relationship -- within a life-context, if you will. The key to that relationship is love. And the basis of love is the recognition of what is essential about each student" (Anderson, 1983, p. 32).

Concluding Remarks

Closeness and touching are of paramount importance to the psychological and physical development of a child. Admittedly, some individuals were reared in an environment which may have been disinclined toward outward display of affection. Hence, some teachers may agree with the appropriateness and value

of positive physical contacts with students, but, because of their experience, find it uncomfortable to engage in such behaviors. Or some children, because of their family background and experience, may be somewhat tactually defensive and resist certain forms of physical contact. In this case, the teacher's respect for the child as a human being will dictate the type of closeness or contact attempted. Nevertheless, teachers must still respond to the question, what easier way to convey to a child (or an adult, for that matter) an attitude of acceptance, nurturance, and love than by touch?

Since all of our interactions with others communicate something, it is important to ask what message is being given to children by an adult's refusal or hesitance to interact physically with the child, except to push, pull, pound, or mold. Perhaps the child learns that the body is evil or dirty, or that anyone who <u>does</u> touch you is evil. Perhaps children learn that we do not want them near us, or that they are not really important, or that we really do not care about them as individuals. Perhaps they learn that education is simply assimilating a list of facts. Perhaps they learn that school is a boring, uncaring, unfriendly place and should be avoided as much as possible.

Obviously, these are not the lessons we want the children to learn. Such lessons may produce individuals who are uncomfortable with their own body and with closeness with others. Such lessons produce children who have a limited or shallow self-concept. And, because of these limitations, these children are restricted in their ability to relate warmly and successfully with other people. How many lonely or disturbed, tactually failed people already exist (and are any of them teachers?)?

Human skin is not simply an outer shell designed to keep our "insides"

inside. It is the largest organ of the body (Montagu, 1978) and contains a multitude of sensory receptors to receive information through touch. Touch is an important means by which information about our world is gained, helping us to recognize, identify, and discriminate among objects and people, and to determine relationships among and between those objects and people. Perhaps more importantly, however, touch is a primary means by which we communicate with and relate to one another. Touch very effectively communicates an attitude of caring, love, and acceptance; of recognition, support, and encouragement; of pride and relationship. As teachers, it is important that this very natural tool be consciously and purposefully employed in our interactions with children.

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